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Ian Patterson. Guernica and Total War

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Ian Patterson.
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Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2007.

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Even though this book has been timed to coincide with the seventieth anniversary of the bombing of Gernika, and in spite of its title, it is not actually a book about Gernika or its bombing at all. Patterson uses the bombing campaign and the various conflicting reports of it as a starting point on a journey through various cultural texts, charting how the bombing of Gernika signalled a new form of warfare: “the idea of total war – the belief that the most effective way of winning wars was by the obliteration, or the threat of obliteration, of the civilian population of the enemy’s towns and cities by means of an annihilating attack from the air” (2) Patterson then analyses an impressively wide variety of texts--poetry, prose fiction, cinema, art,-- to show how, as he puts it, “modern men and women have responded to living with a new kind of power and a new focus of fear.” (3)

Patterson provides a cogent and well-argued analysis of a wide variety of eye-witness reports, quoting at length, for example, from Canon Alberto de Onaindia’s famous account, and from

George Steer's reports in The Times. Quoting also from British Parliamentary proceedings, and from Catholic, pro-Franco accounts, Patterson manages to give a very clear picture of the "contradictions [which] abounded" (38) in the accounts which appeared in the weeks and months immediately after the bombing. Most of the first chapter, "Guernika's Thermite Rain" is devoted to the bombing itself. In just seventy five pages, Patterson takes his reader through the origins of what he calls the "profoundly complex conflict" (55) of the Spanish Civil War. With admirable brevity, Patterson gives a coherent and, mostly, clear and accurate overview of the events of the Spanish Civil War, and its significance throughout the rest of Europe. His analysis of the non-intervention policy adopted by the Western democracies leads him on to an interesting discussion of the problematic relationship of the West with aerial bombardment.

This discussion is carried through into the second chapter, "Civilisation and its Discontents" where he identifies an obsession with the possibility of death coming from the air. In a manner reminiscent of Valentine Cunningham (whose British Writers of the Thirties Patterson owes a lot to), he analyses both popular and literary fiction, along with newspaper articles and other non-fiction texts from the time, in the process examining "the moral and psychological effects of bombing". (88) Patterson then goes on to interrogate the notion of "frightfulness", or the policy of using "aerial bombardment for the purpose of terrorising the civilian population". He demonstrates how such a policy affected strategy initially in the colonies, and then in the great European wars of the twentieth century. He provides us with an expert analysis of this atavistic fear, and how military strategists have chosen to exploit it. He also quotes at length from Giulio Douhet, the Italian fascist and philosopher of total war and from Bertrand Russell, highlighting the essentially inhuman nature of aerial bombardment.

The third chapter, "War begins at Home" is devoted mainly to the literary responses to the bombings of the Second World War – the London Blitz, the bombing of Dresden and the

atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Throughout, Patterson provides an interesting commentary on how the paranoia surrounding aerial bombardments affects the literature of the period. By linking discourses generated by the bombings of towns and cities from Gernika in 1937 to Baghdad in 2007, Patterson convincingly demonstrates how the Proustian “impression” of danger is linked “more with the effects of the bombs than with the act of dropping them”.
(93)

As impressively analysed as this book is--and it does manage to consider a very wide range of sources--it still has some fundamental flaws. One of the biggest problems with this book is that Patterson does not spend enough time on the bombing of Gernika which means he does not satisfactorily demonstrate his main point that the bombing of Gernika was the first demonstration of “the idea of total war”, or, more correctly, that it was perceived to be so. Patterson does acknowledge that bombing campaigns since “have been on such a scale that Guernica’s fate seems almost insignificant by comparison” but he then arguably fails to satisfactorily show why it has assumed the significance it has. The root cause of this problem lies in the surprising brevity of the book – it is just too short to allow for a comprehensive analysis, which means Patterson often makes interesting points but then undermines them by failing to expand and illustrate more fully. A very good example is his explanation for the mythification of the bombing of Gernika. Patterson quotes and endorses Franz Borkenau’s contention that “one of the lures or attractions of Spain was that ‘it was a civilisation near to ourselves, closely connected with the historical past of Europe, but which has not participated in our later developments’”. Patterson then goes on to argue that:

the innocent people of Guernica, with their strong family structures and rural market, coupled with their very old democratic tradition, made the town a bridge between the exotic unreality of the ‘native’ villages

bombarded into submission by the RAF and the pressing ordinariness of life in an English city, so vulnerable to attack from the air. (57)

The point is an interesting one and one would have liked to read more analysis and evidence for it, but unfortunately Patterson does not provide any. It is at least arguable that there is some evidence for such primitivist arguments being used to describe the Basque population (especially in some of the descriptions of Basque refugee children) but Patterson undercuts his own argument by glossing over the details.

A similar flaw is his tendency, infrequent, to be sure, but nevertheless present, to make sweeping generalisations without any reference or evidence. On page 8, Patterson declares that “The Soviet Union’s supporters in the Communist parties of non-Communist countries were exacerbating already existing inner social tensions in the name of the struggle yet to come.” He might very well be correct in his statement, but the reader has no way of knowing because Patterson does not provide any evidence.

The terseness of the book thus means that Patterson is not able to develop some points as fully as one might have liked him to. It also sometimes means that Patterson is open to misinterpretation. The picture on page 18 is plainly not one of Gernika, and to be fair the caption does not say it is--it merely says it was used in the BBC magazine The Listener, but to allow the repetition of such a mistake is unforgivable. This is true especially because so much of the book is about analysing discourse generated by the bombing--an analysis of mistakes such as this would have been invaluable in further developing the critique of the primitivist argument that Patterson initiates but then so frustratingly does not continue. There are similar problems with other aspects of his analysis of the events of 1937--from the casualty figures to the intrinsic differences between the Basque population and that of the rest of Spain, from the long and

complicated history of Anglo-Spain relations to the effects of declaring Gernika “a city of peace” (173). Patterson makes a plethora of very interesting points and then glosses over them when a fuller discussion of the social and historical contexts would have been invaluable.

If it is true that there is not enough in the book about Gernika, then it is also true that, perversely, there is not enough about aerial bombardment since either. Patterson ends on a fascinating anecdote that the tapestry reproduction of Picasso’s masterpiece that hangs outside the United Nations Security Council chamber, was hidden behind flags on the 5 February 2003, as the members gathered to hear US Secretary of State Colin Powell “present the American case for the war against Iraq”. One could have expected further incisive analysis of our relationship with aerial bombardment in a post 9-11 world, linking the old project of “frightfulness” with the present-day rhetoric of “collateral damage” but Patterson tantalisingly fails to deliver.

There is also a deeper more ideological aspect to this problem which originates from the way Patterson uncritically quotes Borkenau asserting “that the backward, stagnant, and inefficient Spaniard can well compete, in the field of human values, with the efficient, practical and progressive European” (56-7) and Lord Strabolgi: ‘whatever we may be told about the rest of the population of Spain, the Basques are a very pious...and...admirable people.’ (39) By devoting an almost entire book on how the bombing of a Basque town affected thinking and discourse in (mainly) Britain, America, France and Germany, Patterson is in a very real danger of adding to the Orientalist nature of a lot of scholarship on or about Spain. One wonders why he chose not to look at the legacy of the bombing within Spain itself, both during and since the Francoist dictatorship.

It seems harsh to criticise a book for what it does not do, when it does what it does so well, but the reader is left rather confused--the book neither engages with the events of Gernika to be

described as a book about the bombing of Gernika, nor does it deal in enough depth with the legacy of Gernika on aerial bombardment since the end of the Cold War to be described as a comprehensive analysis of our relationship with aerial warfare. Its greatest strength--its remarkable succinctness remains, then, its greatest weakness.